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Ethics for Modern Christians
Part I
Micah 6:6-8
Luke 16:19-26

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One of the cohesive motifs in the incredible story of Jesus of Nazareth is conflict. And one of the major points of conflict, which occurs time and time again is ethics - "proper behavior for the religious person".

The society in which Jesus lived knew what that meant. The law of Israel prescribed proper behavior in every conceivable kind of situation. But Jesus was constantly on the edge of the law - sometimes seeming to contradict it, sometimes appearing to defy it, always demanding more of the individual than the law prescribed.

A classic illustration of that is found in Luke 14. Jesus was dining in the home of a Pharisee on the Sabbath: a man appeared who was ill: everyone was watching to see what He would do. He asked, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" It was a difficult question. It was not lawful to work on the Sabbath: healing was working. And while they contemplated the dilemma, Jesus healed the man. The Pharisees didn't like that. Nor did they like the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. It upset the stable, time-honored ethical guidelines by which they were living their lives.

But first, let's look at our situation. The trouble with talking about Christian Ethics today is that we must do so in a situation quite unlike anything Christian people have had to face before.

Someone observed recently that nostalgia isn't what it used to be, but every so often I find myself envying the simplicity of the past. I mentioned, in the Broadstreeter, my affection for those days when cold weather and snow were the cause for excitement and great rejoicing, instead of the deep anxieties we are currently experiencing. But I particularly envy the simplicity of the past in the area of ethics. It may not have been entirely comfortable on the American frontier, but the moral decisions a person had to make were relatively straightforward and clear. Right was right and wrong was wrong and, most important of all, there was wide general consensus about which was which. That may be an oversimplification.

But the point is that we perceive that the past was simple, and in many ways, it was, I am convinced. We have glamorized it and slightly exaggerated it in that classically nostalgic morality play known as an American Western. I still like Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers. In their world things were primal and simple. Evil could be contained easily in one, neat characterization; a mean, low-down, unshaven, stage coach bandit, who rolled cigarettes, drank whiskey - from the bottle, and abused women and horses. In the same way, Good was contained easily in an opposite characterization, a polite, clean shaven gentleman, who never smoked, stood at the bar without drinking, who was faithful to his girl but in an entirely platonic way, who loved his horse, and became violent only reluctantly, in response to evil, which he overcame heroically at the end of the movie - without wrinkling his shirt. How sweet it was! How neat and wonderfully simple.

And for a long time it was adequate. Part of the reason for the renewed interest in those old Westerns today is a product of our very complex ethical situation. Likewise the radio programs which used the same basic format; the F.B.I. in Peace and War, The Shadow, The Lone Ranger, The Green Hornet. A whole generation or two of us learned our moral philosophy in those terms. And when World War II came along, the movie makers particularly had a whole new vehicle for expressing the eternal struggle between good and evil. Our obsession with all of that today is only partly nostalgia.

It is also indicative, I believe, of a deep awareness that we have been dumped into an ethical wilderness, that the simple common denominators of yesterday are gone forever; and that our brave new world is asking more of us ethically than any generation before.

War has always been hell, as the men who fought in them have always known. We are the first generation to have seen it first hand, and known it deeply. For we have seen the romance of conflict turn into the unbelievable horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We have seen the heroism of Omaha Beach and Iwo Jima become a bloody stand-off in Korea, and in South East Asia "protective reaction strikes" against peasant villages. Sensitive, thoughtful people have had to come to terms with the fact that good and evil are not so easily differentiated anymore.

In addition, we have had to deal with all the complexity brought about by technology. There are some devilishly difficult problems inherent in a technological culture. Professor Roger Shinn of Union Theological Seminary reminded the Ohio Pastors Conference two weeks ago of how interdependent our world has become and that there are often moral implications about decision which were once safely simple. For instance, during the oil embargo several years ago, you and I were merely inconvenienced. We fretted about the increased costs of gasoline but we adjusted rather quickly. But in other countries the higher costs of petroleum forced reductions in the amount of chemical fertilizers produced. Some economists estimate that as many as twenty million people died of starvation as a result. I'm not sure what to do with that information except worry about it.

Consider something very immediate: the energy crisis. We know how interdependent we are. The behavior of one affects the comfort of the many. It is a matter of ethics to affirm that and to act on it by reducing the temperature of our homes. And I confess to growing impatience with the ethic implied in the immediate and unquestioned decision that education is the expendable activity in our society. I'm not very comfortable with the fact that school may be closed - first - that education is the place where all the sacrifices must be made.

The spill-over from technology is vast. It has given birth to a new moral standard which places its highest premium on success. Edward Fiske, education editor for the New York Times, did an article on why college honor systems have broken down. He cited a Stanford study which revealed that most students who violate honor codes are not flunking out, but "protecting A's". "Students can sit down and calculate what each credit is worth in terms of career earnings - whereas education used to be regarded as the idealistic pursuit of knowledge." (N.Y.Times, 10/12/75).

We are not the first generation to worry about the moral standards of young people. But we are the first generation in which young people have easily and readily available to them alcohol, drugs, and sex. It's terribly easy to pontificate about morality when we never had to make the decisions, and I confess to occasional gratitude for coming of age in a far simpler time - and to deep admiration for the vast majority of young people who are making their way through the situation we have created for them with some sense of moral responsibility still intact. God bless them.

On and on it goes. Ethical questions don't come at us in the form of the unshaven stage coach bandit. Rather, they come in new forms and shapes and styles such as organ transplants, artificial prolongation of life, abortion, capital punishment as a national event and chastity in a culture which literally inundates every man, woman and young person with sexual stimuli.

That's only part of the problem. At the same time that the issues were getting more complex ethically, another equally devastating phenomenon was occurring. The traditional structures of moral authority in our culture, the institutional church among them, was losing credibility.

Part of my experience as a youngster - and yours as well, I am sure - was trust in and respect for some very visable authority figures. In my home that was a kind of ultimate imperative. Respect authority - listen to it - obey it - wherever you encounter it; school, church, Boy Scouts, athletics, policy - and, of course, parents. Dialogue regarding the legitimacy of parental decisions in my house went something like this: "Why?", "Because I said so, that's why." On the back side of our report cards was a section called citizenship - a list of every conceivable kind of classroom vice. I could get by with little check marks beside "Talks out of turn", "Doesn't follow directions". But when something called "Doesn't respect authority" was checked I was in very hot water, indeed.

That mentality is gone, I think. And with it, religious authority has disappeared as well. Barclay observes: "This generation does not like to be told not to do anything. Unlimited freedom and unrestricted permission to experiment are the contemporary demands..." (The Ten Commandments, Forward).

It is conceded generally that somewhere in excess of eighty per cent of American Roman Catholics simply ignore the Church's ban on artificial contraception, regardless of how many times it is reiterated and defended. Nobody is listening to the church for moral direction. And when the Pope, as he did recently in the matter of women in the priesthood, refuses to acknowledge one of the great moral revolutions of our age, the authority of the church is depleted even more.

So, here we are, in a brand new situation, with the props pulled out from under the old certainties, with a monumental amount of handwriting going on, with people wondering what will become of us and with those faced with the making of hard moral decisions receiving precious little support and help from the church.

My deepest conviction is that the time is now for the church to be involved deeply and aggressively in the ethical turmoil, not simply by dragging out the old lists of don'ts which ignore the newness of the situation: not certainly by parroting the latest fad under the guise of freedom; but by going down into the valley where life is lived, by taking seriously the fact that more is demanded of us than ever before. We have resources to bring with us; perhaps more than we realize. We have the witness of the Bible, the experience of our history and the Good News of a Gospel that seeks not to restrict and repress but to set us free to become fully and joyfully and morally human beings. But most of all we have one another: a forum where the issues may be discussed and a relationship in which wisdom and experience may be shared.

Thus a series of sermons on Ethics for Modern Christians. We will think about the New Morality next week, and later - in March, two more sermons on the Christian definition of freedom and the basis for a positive ethical stance. No one should be naive enough to assume that the matter of Christian Ethics may be dealt with adequately in one or four or a hundred and four sermons. My hope is that together we might raise some good questions, and bring to bear on them the light of our scriptures and stimulate new and careful thinking. And in the time remaining today I should like to offer three basic understandings which are the foundation for any Christian approach to the question of morality.

First: Christian ethics are ethics of response. That is, Christians do not engage in ethical activity in order to persuade God to be kind. Christians are ethical in response to something God has already done. In the Old Testament the law of Israel begins, not with a rule or prohibition, but with a positive affirmation about God. The Shema, repeated across the centuries by the faithful, reads: "Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord: and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your might." The Ten Commandments, likewise, begin with a statement about God - "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Ethics begin in the Bible with God; with His gracious activity. People are to obey the law, not in order to convince God to deal graciously with them, but in gratitude because God has already acted graciously. That's rudimentary, and it's first. Our definition of Christian morality may be nothing more than a list of sins to avoid. But in the Bible ethical behavior is positive; something done out of gratitude to God.

Second: Christian Ethics cannot be separated from Christian theology. The genius of the Hebrew prophets was in identifying the hypocrisy of a religion which allows for pious affirmation on the one hand, and behavior which denies what the person purports to believe. Our Old Testament Lesson this morning summarizes: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? He has showed you, O man, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" If you wish to make that very contemporary substitute for those rams and all that oil "a thousand recitations of the Lord's Prayer and ten thousand public invocations."

John Baillie, the Scotsman, made the same point eloquently in an essay on the Incarnation I read recently: "To confess the Godhead of Christ can never be an easy thing for anybody. But I am quite sure that its greatest difficulty is not theoretical but practical. Indeed I should say that the way to tell whether a man really believes in the Divinity of Christ is not to listen to his verbal professions, but to look at his deeds." (A Reasoned Faith, p.129).

The third broad understanding is that the Christian approach to morality puts its highest premium on the care and nurture of the individual. That seems simple enough but it is a very critical point. For the fact is that when we talk about ethics we usually end up designating all the evil things a person should not do: we talk about rules, restrictions, prohibitions: "thou shalt nots" overwhelm the "thou shalts" and the care of individual people is simply lost.

The New Testament Lesson this morning was the Parable of a rich man and a beggar. Jesus told this parable to a group of Pharisees: men who had spent the entirety of their lives being moral. They knew what was right and ethical. They obeyed the law - totally. As far as is humanly possible they did no evil. And Jesus told them the story of a very rich man who enjoyed all the prerogatives of his position, and a poor man, Lazarus, who appeared every day at the rich man's gate to eat the droppings from his table. It's a subtle story. There were no table utensils at meals; nor were there linen napkins. It was the practice to wipe one's hands on scraps of bread after a meal. These are the droppings from the rich man's table on which Lazarus was subsisting.

Barclay believes that our Lord was suggesting that it happened with some well-meant intent on the part of the rich man. Every day Lazarus showed up at the gate, and every day one of the rich man's servants brought him the bread scraps to eat.

But at the end of the story both men are dead: Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham and the rich man in hell. The key to the story is in the fact that the rich man did no evil. He wasn't a bad man: he didn't abuse Lazarus; in fact, he fed him. Nor was his sin in being rich. His sin was in the good he did not do. He never really saw Lazarus; he passed by him daily and never once saw the poor, miserable wreck of humanity lying outside the gate. That is the particularly Christian ethical concern. You can obey all the rules and never come to grips with the Gospel of Jesus Christ which insists that Lazarus - the man - is far more important than the law. Any ethic which calls itself Christian must come to rest finally on Jesus Christ. Everything about Him - His teaching, His parables, His life itself, keeps insisting that to be good is to care - personally, lovingly, painfully, helpfully - for the neighbor in need.

One writer put it this way: "Here is the difference which Christianity made. Jesus came to tell men of God who cares desperately, a God who is involved in the human situation, a God...who is afflicted with our afflictions, a God who is concerned." (William Barclay, Ethics in a Permissive Society, p.31).

In subsequent weeks we shall explore further. But for now, in a brand new and complex cultural situation, God's call to you and me - His ethical demand is exquisitely simple. It is this - "Care. For Christ's sake, care."

Amen.

Father, we need help to live our lives honestly and faithfully. We need the support of one another in the church. We need the prodding of Your Spirit to open our lives to others who need us. We know that you want us to care. Help us to love - as You have loved us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.